The Routledge Handbook of Placemaking

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Preface

Publication details
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Published online on: 31 Dec 2020

How to cite :- Cara Courage. 31 Dec 2020, Preface from: The Routledge Handbook of Placemaking Routledge
Accessed on: 30 Dec 2023

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... the art is in what we’re doing. This is art.

(Homebaked participant, 2013)

From Jane Jacobs’ (1961) street ballet as the art form of the city, to the quote above, from a participant in the Liverpool, UK arts-led regeneration project, Homebaked, arts and placemaking have been intertwined as performative metaphor and practice for some time. It is the explicit inclusion of the arts in placemaking that is one of its differentiating factors, when stood next to its built environment sector siblings. Art interventions transform cities every day, at an intimate and micro scale, to a public and macro scale. Art in the city cannot be othered from any other built environment process. A product of historical processes, any creative intervention or practice in a place context exists in an interrelational matrix ecology of interdependent actors and organisations – its culture. Culture is not a performative gesture in cities. People live, create, and recreate culture in cities on a daily basis. The city does not ‘create culture,’ nor is culture in its service. The city is more than ‘of’ culture. The city is culture.

A list of the outcomes of an arts-based approach to place is seemingly endless, as fundamental to its being. Art in place intersects with the economy, innovation, health and wellbeing, education and learning, and can be attributed to (variously and not exhaustively): engendering creativity, understanding, self-reflection, and empathy; respite and pleasure; attracting and retaining residents; employment and income generation; the promotion and actualisation of positive and equitable neighbourhood change; social cohesion and inclusion and active citizen participation; (re)imagining new narratives for individuals and communities; acting as a catalyst for cross-sectoral collaboration and networking; and having cognitive, psychological, and material impact on a place’s form and function.

Art and placemaking will forever be associated with ‘creative placemaking,’ a term created by Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa in their 2010 Creative Placemaking White Paper for the USA’s National Endowments for the Arts. Creative placemaking, as ‘defined’ on its third page, is understood as something that marries public and private, that has fiscal benefits as well as social and cultural ones; there is a public–private investment mix and a concern with communities thriving; and an overt mention of arts and culture as a tool of and mechanism for placemaking. Since 2010, creative placemaking as presented by Markusen and Gadwa has been critiqued, not least by themselves (Markusen and Gadwa Nicodemus, in Courage and McKeown, 2019,
amongst others prior to this) and keenly along lines of race and power, and vis-à-vis regeneration and gentrification.

In my own research, I saw artists engaged in a social practice art work in the placemaking context as social practice placemaking (Courage, 2017). Place-based artists, while not necessarily calling themselves placemakers, hold a relational concept of space that encompasses social structure and material and embodied dimensions. They work in the space that is at the intersection of object, structure, and action, and that interjects with the material, social, and symbolic dimensions of space in the context of the politics of the public realm and urban development. Examples abound of artists taking into their own hands the means of production and assets of development – the land and buildings – and keeping them for creative and community use, keeping the community in place and using the gentrifying multipliers of the arts to community benefit. What is key here is the intentionality and the very singular skill that a socially engaged artist can bring to a place-based context. These artists don’t need to be ‘of’ the place in which they are working, but they do need to understand places and communities based on their own lived experience. There is a specific skillset of the artist that is able to broker conversations between different stakeholders in a process, the art process becoming a relational object by which to talk through contested issues. This is what Amin (2008) would call the micropublic – no one group will ever be in total agreement, but through a facilitated process, here, using the art process, a group can come to a settled consensus, where, even if their own view isn’t taken forward into action, they will have been listened to and been active in the decision-making.

Through this lens in particular, placemaking, as a mode of arts-based activity in the public realm, is a co-produced practice, one that is also concerned with process as much as any material outcome. The artist might be an instigator and a catalyst of activity, but they will work in equanimity with the community to create shared outcomes and outputs, and their aim will be to ‘hand over’ as it were, the life and legacy of the project to the community. It demands a working in a relative expertism (Courage, 2017, and this volume) that is not of sole, singular authorship, and it demands you get out into the public realm and are hands-on with it, conversing with the people of it, questioning the politics of it. This is a practice aligned with social justice, and with artist Tania Bruguera’s Arte Útil, ‘useful art,’ that suggests art as a tool or device and draws on artistic thinking to imagine, create, and implement tactics that change how we act in society. Here, projects should: propose new uses for art within society; use artistic thinking to challenge the field within which it operates; respond to current urgencies; operate on a 1:1 scale; replace authors with initiators and spectators with users; have practical, beneficial outcomes for its users; pursue sustainability; and re-establish aesthetics as a system of transformation. The similarity between Arte Útil and the placemaking of this, and indeed other, sections of this Handbook is self-evident.

None of this is to say that arts-led or creative placemaking should not be met without critique. Arts in place has been used as a salver to smooth over social cleansing and to give a veneer of community-located authenticity or acceptability, a placewash (Pritchard, 2019) as much as an artswash, where the arts are used as a tool to gloss gentrification and used as an outward badge of good placemaking practice. In the context of placemaking or arts in the public realm more generally, this begs a number of questions: are – are artists complicit in a gentrification agenda? Is their role to protest in such places, for and with the people of those places? Or, does the artist have an agency to take place development into their own hands and make it work for a social and cultural agenda?

Placemaking, as understood in this Handbook, does not work with or towards the ideal, but with the real – it’s a messy process and it’s conflicted and it’s open to a healthy critique. Herein lies its radical potential. We know how to do the stuff of urban planning and design differently
now and we have a whole sector of artists and creative practitioners that specialise in just that. Arts-led and socially concerned placemaking celebrates the capacity of the arts to address the city as a complex ecosystem of vibrant material and symbolic creativity that is ever in flux. Such projects can integrate culture and community and can result in boosted local economies and increased levels of social connection and civic engagement. Such projects can also intersect and advance missions in transportation, housing, employment, health care, environmental sustainability, and education.

The barriers to inclusion that many communities of place face do not exist in isolation from each other and we can’t collectively address complex place-based issues – such as environmental collapse, discrimination, social inequity, or inequitable access to quality public spaces – with a singular agenda in mind. This means being cognisant of, and actively supporting, the arts in offering quotidian spaces and practices of vernacular creativity. Not only will working with all that artists know (Whitehead, 2006, and this volume), and with making art useful, and seeing the people of place as creative placemakers, result in a more progressive and integrated approach to cities, but it also makes possible a rethinking of the synergies between the arts, community, and our urban place. The intentionality of a project matters. This is the start, middle, and end and the golden thread that joins it all, and it is in the sensibility of the arts practice and process and in working with artists in equanimity that the radical power of placemaking can begin to be realised.

This section begins with the artists voice, moves through scales of artist and arts practice, and closes with what all placemakers should be primarily concerned with, the experience of place in the first person. It is curated to make it useful for any reader, from any placemaking purview, to both recognise their practice in others and to extend their practice through learning from the similar and the different.

The section opens with a reflective and philosophical questioning and probing of arts and placemaking practice, from Catherine Fennell and Daniel Tucker (‘Displacemaking 2015 and 2020’). In this two-part interview, the two consider their own experiences and encounters with placemaking projects. They pay close attention to how these encounters tease out the contradictions and complexities facing the field at large and take up several notable developments, including placemaking’s professionalisation and the standardisation of familiar tools and techniques, such as storytelling. What, they ask, can such developments tell us about how placemaking projects address, or might be better positioned to address, ongoing equity issues at a contemporary moment?

Adelina Ong continues the consideration of an emplaced practice, in ‘Placemaking through parkour and Art du Démplacement (ADD) as a Singaporean applied performance practitioner in London.’ This chapter reflects on the parkour and Art du Démplacement-inspired place practices used as part of a session on place and placemaking in London, UK. Ong posits that the ‘lively nomad’ might use placemaking as a way of resisting assimilation and being transformed into a ‘zombie migrant’. Ong reflects on a placemaking that prompts reconsideration of the failure encouraged in creative learning environments and an understanding of death as an invitation to contemplate an understanding of living that recognises our interconnectedness to the more-than-human in place.

Artist Frances Whitehead continues this consideration through the lens of her practice and projects in her ‘Embedded Artist Project: epistemic disobedience + place.’ The chapter includes global case studies of Whitehead’s work, epistemologically driven practice experiments under the concept of the Embedded Artist. These experiments aim to explore the role of culture in sustainability and demonstrate how multiple values (social, cultural, environmental, and economic) can inform a net benefits model of development.
Staying with a case study, Gail Skelly and Tim Edensor, in ‘Routing out place identity through the vernacular production practices of a community light festival,’ focus on a community festival in the north of the UK in the wake of its loss of funding. The chapter considers three aspects of this adaptation to unpromising circumstances: the ongoing reproduction of the mythic story on which the festival is founded; the ways in which the parade route is devised, organised, and managed; and the inventive selection of an annual theme that both marks historical identity and undergirds a shared sense of place. Under conditions of austerity, longstanding local inhabitants have managed to keep the festival going while fostering an inclusive sense of participation amongst recently arrived, more affluent residents and have developed their own social, organisational, and creative skills while extending a strong, shared sense of place amongst participants.

Moving into a still-wider terrain of practice, Tom Borrup (‘Artists, creativity, and the heart of city planning’) considers the role of artists, placemaking and planning. This chapter focuses on ways artists have enhanced the meaning and outcomes of the public participation process in planning in the United States. It traces precedents from the 1960s, and describes some approaches used. While some literature on public participation in city planning cites the value of storytelling, sketching, and other creative techniques, calls from planners for artists to join them are absent. Artists who come from a tradition of community activism, on the other hand, have been quicker to engage in planning. The author calls on planners to go beyond the consultative function of public engagement: to see it as an opportunity to build on cross-cultural relationships and working capacities, co-creation and collective problem-solving, and to promote participatory democracy.

The section then turns to its largest scale — the placemaking-led regeneration of Times Square, and an in-depth account of this transformation process, from its then–Founding Director of Times Square Arts, Sherry Dobbin (“If you can make it there, you can make it anywhere…”: cultural placemaking at the heart of cities’). Dobbin reveals how she structured the programme and presents lessons learned in practice and experimentation. Project examples are included to demonstrate how to raise artistic ambition, while simultaneously contributing to the stakeholders’ and communities’ strategic objectives for place. Dobbin’s subsequent methodology and framework were shared internationally amongst city- and town-centre leadership and cultural civic agencies, as well as implemented into guidance documents. The chapter also includes how the cultural placemaking approach was adapted for a London BID and concluding principles that can be applied across city centres of all scales.

Lastly, philosopher, curator, and critic, Trude Schjelderup Iversen, offers, in ‘Sculpturing sound in space: on The Circle and the Square (2016) by Suzanne Lacy,’ a first-person account of the experience of arts in place and placemaking. Reflecting around three key concepts – place, space, and (emphatical) experience — it is found that Lacy’s work is often interpreted as early examples of community-based activist and participatory art practice. From the purview of an embodied experience of the artwork and conversation with the artist, the author posits that one must create one’s own experience and this creation is related to an aesthetical pursuit in Lacy’s work and is fundamental in how Lacy approaches and prioritises within community-driven collaborations.

References
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James F Lima and Andrew J. Jones

Chapter 4: A future of creative placemaking
Sarah Calderon and Erik Takeshita

Chapter 5: Making places for survival: looking to a creative placemaking past for a guide to the future
Jeremy Liu

Chapter 9: From the dust of bad stars: disaster, resilience, and placemaking in Little Tokyo
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Chapter 10: From moon village to mural village: the consequences of creative placemaking in Ihwa-dong, Seoul
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Chapter 11: Free State Boulevard and the story of the East 9th Street Placekeepers
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Chapter 14: Experts in their own tomorrows: placemaking for participatory climate futures
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Chapter 16: More than a mural: participatory placemaking on Gija Country
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Chapter 17: ‘I am not a satnav’: Affective placemaking and conflict in ‘the ginnel that roared’
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Chapter 27: Is ‘tactical urbanism’ an alternative to neoliberal urbanism?: reflections on an exhibition at the MoMA
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Chapter 29: The solution is in the problem; the art of turning a threat into an opportunity by developing resilience using a creative placemaking critical praxis
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Chapter 39: Translating Outcomes: Laying the groundwork for interdisciplinary evaluation of creative placemaking
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Chapter 40: Transforming community development through arts and culture: a developmental approach to documentation and research
Victor Rubin

Chapter 42: Creative placemaking and placekeeping evaluation challenges from the practitioner perspective: an interview with Roy Chan
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Chapter 43: A theory of change for creative placemaking: the experience of the National Endowment for the Arts’ Our Town program: an interview with Patricia Moore Shaffer, PhD
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Chapter 44: Creative Placemaking and comprehensive community development: rethinking neighborhood change and evaluation
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